

Message Text

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PAGE 01 MANILA 10936 260954Z

46

ACTION EA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7941

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

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AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 10936

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, RP

SUBJECT: ESPALSON SAYS PEACE AND ORDER SITUATION IN MINDANAO

"STABILIZED"

1. SUMMARY: TOP PHILIPPINE MILITARY COMMANDER IN SOUTH (ESPALDON) HAS ONCE AGAIN ANNOUNCED THAT THE MUSLIM INSURGENCY HAS BEEN VIRTUALLY ELIMINATED AND THAT ALL REMAINING TROUBLE IS WORK OF CRIMINAL ELEMENTS. HE SAID 25,000 REBLE SOR 80 PERCENT OF TOTAL HAVE LAID DOWN ARMS. AS IN PAST, SUCH REMARKS BEAR LITTLE RELATION TO REALITY. MUSLIM INSURGENCY APPEARS TO HAVE SLOWED SINCE HIGH POINT EARLIER THIS YEAR COINCIDENTAL WITH ISLAMIC CONFERENCE, BUT IT CONTINUES WITH CYCLICAL UPS AND DOWNS. CURRENT TREND IS TOWARD RANDOM TERRORISM AS OPPOSED TO ORTHODOX MILITARY CONFLICT. END SUMMARY.

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PAGE 02 MANILA 10936 260954Z

2. ACCORDING GOP NEWS AGENCY (PNA), ADMIRAL ESPALDON (WHO

IS NOW SUPREME MILITARY COMMANDER IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES) SAID JULY 21 THAT "PEACE AND ORDER" SITUATION IN MINDANAO AND SULU HAS "STABILIZED." HE CLAIMED THAT 25,000 REBLES, OR 80 PERCENT OF THOSE WHO HAD DECLARED OPPOSITION TO GOVERNMENT, HAVE LAID DOWN ARMS TO RESUME NORMAL LIFE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES. THE REMAINING 20 PERCENT ARE "INCORRIGIBLE CRIMINAL ELEMENTS," ACCORDING TO ESPALDON. THESE "SCATTERED BANDS" ARE NOW BEING PURSUED NOT ONLY BY REGULAR ARMED FORCES BUT ALSO BY CIVILIAN HOME DEFENSE UNITS MANY OF WHICH COMPOSED OF FORMER REBLES.

3. COMMENT: WHILE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE INSURGENCY MAY HAVE "STABILIZED" IN A SENSE, THE RESULT COULD HARDILY BE DESCRIBED AS PEACEFUL. LOW LEVEL FIGHTING CONTINUES WITH CYCLICAL UPS AND DOWNS AS HAS BEEN THE CASE FOR PAST THREE YEARS. HOSTILITIES HAVE PERHAPS BEEN ON A DOWNWARD SWING SINCE UPSURGE WHICH BEGAN PRIOR TO MAY ISLAMIC CONFERENCE IN ISTANBUL, BUT WE HAVE CONFIRMED RECENT REPORTS OF SERIOUS FIGHTING AND/OR INCIDENTS OF TERRORISM IN ALL THREE SECTORS -- SULU, COTABATO AND THE LANA O PROVINCES.

4. ESPALDON'S PUBLIC OPTIMISM IS BELIED BY INFORMATION AVAILABLE, IN SPITE OF SEMI-MUZZLED PRESS, TO ANYONE WHO CARES TO FOLLOW THE SITUATION (FEW FILIPINOS DO). SOME RECENT SERIOUS INCIDENTS IN COTABATO (SUCH AS JUNE 14 GRENADING OF DATU PIANG SCHOOL AND REBEL SEIZURE OF PAGALURAN TOWN ON SAME DATE) HAVE BEEN REPORTED LOCALLY. EDUCATED MUSLIMS IN MANILA ARE UNANIMOUS IN THEIR CONVICTION, WHICH THEY WILL FREELY SHARE, THAT GOP'S DEFECTION PROGRAM HAS NOT ELIMINATED HARD CORE OF REBEL (MNLF) SUPPORTERS. GOP ANXIETY REGARDING OUTCOME OF NEXT YEAR'S ISLAMIC CONFERENCE (WHICH WAS EMPHASIZED BY FORSEC ROMULO AT RECENT ASEAN FOREIGN MINISTER'S MEETING) AS PROOF ENOUGH THAT GOVERNMENT IS NOT SWALLOWING ITS OWN RHETORIC.

5. IT IS OUR IMPRESSION THAT DURING PAST YEAR THERE HAS BEEN DECLINE IN "ORTHODOX" COMBAT BETWEEN GUERRILLAS AND AFP. SUCH COMBAT IS PRESENTLY CONFINED TO JOLO

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PAGE 03 MANILA 10936 260954Z

ISLAND AND PORTIONS OF COTABATO SECTOR. THIS DECLINE HAS BEEN MORE THAN BALANCED BY INCREASE IN RANDOM TERRORISM (E.G., GRENADE THROWINGS IN URBAN AREAS, HIJACKINGS, AND KIDNAPPINGS) MOTIVATION FOR WHICH MAY BE POLITICAL, PECUNIARY (IN CASE OF KIDNAPPINGS), DESIRE FOR REVENGE -- OR A MIXTURE OF THESE ELEMENTS. RECENT PROLIFERATION OF OFTEN ILL-DISCIPLINED CIVILIAN DEFENSE UNITS, TO WHICH ESPALDON PROUDLY REFERS, HAS ADDED A NEW FACTOR OF

UNCERTAINTY TO THE HIGH DISORDER WHICH HAS LONG CHARACTERIZED THE MINDANAO FRONTIER. ALTHOUGH REBEL COHERENCE AND COHESIVENESS (NEVER HIGH) HAS DECLINED, QUALITY OF AFP PERFORMANCE AND DISCIPLINE IN THE FIELD HAS LIKEWISE FALLEN OFF.

6. ESPALDON'S FIGURE OF 25,000 RETURNED REBELS IS ANOTHER HIGH (THE LAST WE CAN FIND IS 17,000, ISSUED IN MARCH) BUT NO MORE CREDIBLE THAN OLDER FIGURES. THE GOP IS WELL AWARE MANY DEFECTORS, ENTICED BY LAVISH INITIAL TREATMENT, HAVE BEEN PLAYING A TOTALLY CYNICAL GAME. OTHERS WITH GENUINE GRIEVANCES ARE IN MANY CASES FAR FROM CONVERTED TO GENUINE SUPPORTERS OF GOP. FEW TURN IN WEAPONS, EITHER CACHING THEM OR LEAVING THEM WITH ACTIVE REBEL RELATIVES. MANY HAVE ALREADY RETURNED TO THE HILLS.

7. FINALLY, THERE IS THE QUESTION OF OUTSIDE SUPPORT. IT IS GENERALLY ASSUMED THAT SABAH DEVELOPMENTS HAVE REDUCED IF NOT ELIMINATED FLOW OF ARMS FROM THAT SOURCE. BUT WE HAVE NOT DATA WHICH WOULD CLEARLY CONFIRM MUCH LESS QUANTIFY THAT ASSUMPTION. IT IS CLEAR ENOUGH, HOWEVER, THAT THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF GUNS IN MINDANAO.
SULLIVAN

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